

JAN NERUDA : THE VAMPIRE.

THE excursion steamer had brought us from Constantinople to the shore of the island Prinkipo, and we disembarked. There were not many in the party. A Polish family, father, mother, daughter, and the daughter's husband, then we two. And I must not forget to mention that we had been joined on the wooden bridge leading across the Golden Horn in Constantinople by a Greek, quite a young man; a painter perhaps, to judge by the portfolio which he carried under his arm. Long black tresses flowed over his shoulders, his face was pale, his dark eyes deeply sunken in their sockets. At first he interested me, especially because of his readiness to oblige and his familiarity with local affairs. But he had a good deal too much to say, and I soon turned away from him.

I found the Polish family all the more pleasant. The father and mother were worthy, kindly folk, the husband an elegant young man of unassuming and polished manners. They were travelling to Prinkipo, with the object of spending the summer months there for the sake of the daughter, who was slightly ailing. From the pallor of the beautiful girl it appeared either that

she was just recovering from a severe illness, or that she was about to be attacked by one. She leaned upon her husband, showed a fondness for sitting down, and a frequent, dry cough interrupted her whispering. Whenever she coughed, her escort stood still in concern. He kept looking at her pityingly, and she at him, as much as to say: "There is really nothing the matter,—how happy I am!" They were clearly convinced of recovery and happiness.

On the recommendation of the Greek, who had left us immediately by the landing stage, the family had hired a lodging at the inn which stands on the hill. The inn-keeper was a Frenchman, and his whole house, in accordance with French style, was arranged comfortably and neatly.

We lunched together, and when the heat of noon had abated a little, we all made our way up the hill to a pine-grove where we could refresh ourselves with the view. Scarcely had we discovered a suitable spot and had settled down, than the Greek once more made his appearance. He greeted us in an off-hand way, looked around him, and sat down only a few paces from us. He opened his portfolio and began to draw.

"I believe he has purposely sat close against the rock so that we can't look at his drawing," I said.

"We need not look," observed the young Pole,

“we can see quite enough in front of us.” And after a while he added : “It seems to me that he is including us in the foreground of his drawing,—let him !”

Truly, there was enough for us to see. There is no fairer and happier nook in the world than this Prinkipo. The political female martyr, Irene, a contemporary of Charlemagne, spent a month there “in banishment”—if I could pass a single month of my life there, the memory of it would make me happy for all the remainder of my days. Even that single day I spent there I shall never forget.

The air was as clear as diamond, so soft, so delightful, that it lapped all one’s soul afar. On the right, beyond the sea, towered the brown summits of Asia, on the left, the steep shore of Europe faded into the bluish distance. Close by, Chalki, one of the nine islands that form the “archipelago of the prince,” rose up with its cypress woods into the silent height like a mournful dream, crowned with a large building,—this, a refuge for the infirm of spirit.

The waters of the Sea of Marmora were only slightly ruffled, and played in all colours like a sparkling opal. In the distance was the ocean, white as milk, then rose-tinted, then between two islands like a glowing orange, and beneath us of a beautiful greenish-blue like a transparent sapphire. It was alone in its beauty; no large

vessels were to be seen. Only two small craft with English flags were slipping along hard by the shore. One was a steam-boat, the size of a watchman's booth, the other was manned by about twelve rowers, and when all their oars were lifted at the same time, it was as if molten silver were trickling from them. Artless dolphins were moving in their midst, and flew in long curves above the surface of the water. From time to time across the blue sky peaceful eagles soared, measuring out a boundary between two portions of the world.

The whole slope beneath us was hidden by blossoming roses, with whose fragrance the air was saturated. From the café near the sea, music, muffled by the distance, vibrated through the stainless air.

The impression was overwhelming. We all grew silent and sated our whole being with the prospect which savoured of paradise. The young Polish lady was lying on the turf with her head resting in her husband's lap. The pale oval of her delicate face gained a slight colour and tears suddenly began to flow from her blue eyes. Her husband understood; he bent forward and kissed tear upon tear. Her mother also began to shed tears, and I myself was strangely moved.

“Mind and body must needs be healed here,” whispered the girl. “What a happy place!”

“God knows, I have no enemies, but if I had,

here I would forgive them!" declared the father with trembling voice.

And again all were silent. A feeling of beauty, of inexpressible sweetness, came upon all. Each one felt within him a whole world of happiness, and each one would have shared his happiness with the whole world. Each one felt the same, and so none jarred upon the other. We did not even notice that the Greek, after some hour or so, had arisen, closed his portfolio, and after greeting us again, had gently departed. We remained.

Finally, after some hours, when the distance was hiding itself in a dusky violet hue, which in the South is so magically lovely, the mother urged us to make our way back. We arose and strolled down to the inn, our steps as free and elastic as those of children without a care in the world.

Scarcely had we sat down than we heard quarrelling and abuse under the veranda. Our Greek was quarrelling there with the inn-keeper and we listened for our amusement.

The quarrel did not last long. "If I had no other guests here—" growled the inn-keeper, and came up the steps towards us.

"Would you kindly tell me, sir," asked the young Pole of the inn-keeper, as he came along, "who this gentleman is, and what his name is?"

"Oh, who knows what the fellow's name is,"

growled the inn-keeper, giving a vicious glance downwards. "We call him the Vampire."

"A painter?"

"A fine trade! He only paints corpses. If anybody in Constantinople or round about here dies, he always has a portrait of the corpse ready on the same day. The fellow paints in advance, and he never makes a mistake, the vulture."

The old Polish lady gave a cry of horror,—in her arms lay the daughter, swooning, white as a sheet.

And at the same instant the husband leaped down the small flight of steps, seized the Greek by the throat with one hand, and with the other clutched at the portfolio.

We quickly ran down after him. The two men were already scuffling in the sand.

The portfolio was flung down, and on one leaf, sketched in pencil, was the head of the young Polish girl,—her eyes closed, a sprig of myrtle around her brow.